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ABSTRACT

Language teachers recognize that improving their foreign language proficiency is an ongoing process. New ways of evaluating teachers' language skills, and curriculum changes emphasizing performance highlight skill inadequacies. Many teachers have not reached functional language levels, and language skill upgrading is a more relevant issue than skill maintenance. Other teachers have used their skills only or largely in restricted classroom conditions, with limited opportunities to hear native speech. Teachers can participate in formal and informal programs to enhance their proficiency, including study and travel abroad programs and institutes and summer seminars. The concept of academic alliances, in which teachers assume some responsibility for their own pedagogic and linguistic growth, has taken root in many areas. Local groups identify their own needs and arrange opportunities to practice and improve language skills. Research supporting the effectiveness of these learning experiences is limited. Programs with specific missions to upgrade language proficiency are designed to concentrate on improving teachers' abilities in higher-level tasks of narration, explanation, hypothesis, negotiation, and supported opinion. As future programs are developed, assessment of their effectiveness should be included. (MSE)

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Upgrading the Target Language Proficiency Levels of Foreign Language Teachers

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Need for Improving Proficiencies

Teachers of foreign languages recognize that improving their proficiency in the target language is a never ending process. Regardless of the skill levels they possess, new communicative tasks in the second language continue to challenge them. Recently, the advent of performance descriptions in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986), has provided teachers with new ways of evaluating their language skills. As curriculum, too, emphasizes performance outcomes, teachers find they must be able to comprehend and convey messages in real world contexts larger than those of textbooks and carefully controlled lessons on vocabulary and grammar. Unfortunately, numbers of teachers find that they come up short when measured on this yardstick. Their inadequacies can often be traced to having learned the target language under different paradigms and for different reasons. Today's standards, along with the "small world" phenomenon, mean that teachers often must prove to students, parents, and the community that their second language is strong enough to handle contemporary media, both aural and written, and to interact successfully with native speakers here and abroad.

Questions of Upgrading or Maintaining Skills

A body of research has focused on language maintenance, but improvement of proficiency levels is a distinct issue. When questions of language maintenance are addressed, the usual assumption is that a functional level of language once existed, and the concern revolves around maintaining competency where conditions tend to inhibit or prohibit retention. In the case of foreign language teachers, many never achieved a functional level of language use, and now must endeavor to convert form-based knowledge into communicative skills. Other teachers claim to have had fairly useful skills upon graduation or subsequent time spent abroad, but years of concentrated work speaking first-level French have restricted the conditions in which they speak and even more severely limited their opportunities for listening to native speech. Evaluation reports from inservice programs (Cook, Stout, & Dahl, 1988; Glisan, & Phillips, 1989; Harper, & Lively, 1987) underscore the limiting factor of using the second language primarily to talk with students; teachers fail to receive the stimulation of carrying out tasks and discussing the adult topics and content that define performances at Advanced and Superior levels of proficiency (ACTFL scale).

Where Can Teachers Go To Improve Their Language Proficiencies? Are the Options Effective?

The former question is eminently more answerable than the latter. Teachers participate in a spectrum of formal and informal programs with the hope that their language proficiencies will be enhanced.

Study and Travel Abroad Programs. Many of these programs are either affiliated with U.S. institutions of higher learning or sponsored by foreign institutions for nonnative teachers. Published documentation on gains in proficiency as a result of these experiences is minimal. One small study is reported by Millman (1988) in which eight Alabama recipients of Foreign Language Study Grants were given certified ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) before and after their stay abroad. Results indicated that three individuals remained at the same level of speaking proficiency as measured on the OPI (one each at Intermediate High, Advanced, and Superior). The other five improved a step (one Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid, two Intermediate Mid to Intermediate High, two Advanced to Advanced High). It will become increasingly important that similar measures be taken, especially where financial support from government and foundations is sought.

Institutes and Summer Seminars. Teachers participating in regular or special summer courses at colleges and universities often do so with the intent of

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improving their language skills. In the case of regular coursework offered over the summer, the gauge of success is ultimately a course grade. There is no evidence of a linkage with improved language proficiencies. In the case of special courses for teachers, such as those funded by federal or state agencies, there are limited but emerging efforts to measure competencies. Wipf (1988) reports that differences in mean scores in listening comprehension were significant ($p>.0001$), as measured on the Modern Language Association (MLA) Cooperative Foreign Language Proficiency Tests using a pre-test/post-test design, for a series of four-week National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Institutes. It must be noted that the last institute he described occurred in 1985; speaking was not directly assessed, and the Oral Proficiency Interview was relatively new in academia. A more critical reservation concerns the MLA test itself, because it does not reflect current parameters in listening proficiency, which include authentic passages on a range of topics as the stimulus for specific proficiency levels. However, this study remains one of the few that attempts to assess improved skills in an experimental design.

Most evaluations of institutes and seminars have relied on participants' self-reports of gains and benefits (Cook, Stout, & Dahl, 1988; Harper, & Lively, 1987, 1990). Satisfaction and self-assessment serve a role in program evaluation, but the need remains for confirmation that proficiencies have indeed improved.

Academic Alliances and Informal Opportunities

The concept of academic alliances, whereby teachers assume some responsibility for their own pedagogical and linguistic growth, has taken strong root in many areas of the country. Local groups identify their own areas of need; arranging better opportunities to practice and improve language skills is a fairly common activity. These often take the form of immersion weekends, monthly dinners where current events and timely issues are discussed in the target language, or similar models. Again, virtually no documentation exists on proven effectiveness in improving skills.

Strategies for Upgrading Proficiencies

Programs and institutes with specific missions to upgrade language proficiencies are being designed so that learning experiences concentrate on improving teachers' abilities in higher level tasks of narration, explanation, hypothesis, negotiation, and supported opinion. Glisan and Phillips (1989) describe Saturday workshops where teachers moved through various activities, some of which were at their level of competency, and others that challenged them at higher levels. Cook, Stout, & Dahl (1988) used video comprehension as a means of increasing oral proficiency as well.

As future efforts to upgrade the target language proficiencies of foreign language teachers are developed, assessment of the effectiveness of these efforts must be an accompanying feature. If the efficacy of programs and approaches used to upgrade proficiencies is not evaluated, teachers may go to great effort to recycle themselves without significant improvement.

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